

The Rapture: What do Catholics believe?

When many people, Protestant and Catholic alike, think of the end times, they often think of the “rapture,” a kind of “Left Behind” event where, those who are right with God are mysteriously taken up into heaven, and those who are living in sin, remain on Earth during a time of tribulation and chaos. The Catholic teaching on the end times however, does not support this idea.

The word “rapture” comes from the Latin word used in 1 Thes 4:17, which means “to be caught up”:

*“We who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, **shall be caught up** together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord.” 1Thes 4:15-17*

Catholics have always understood this passage to refer to the Second Coming of Christ, when those believers who are alive during His second coming will not experience death, but rather, will be gloriously transformed and join the saints who are already with Christ. St. Paul is describing the resurrection of the dead that will happen when Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead.

Before the 1800's, all Protestants agreed with the Catholic Church that this event of being “*caught up... in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air*” would occur simultaneously with the Second Coming of Christ and the final judgement.

Another passage that is thought of when people think of the “rapture,” is Matthew 24: 40-42

“Then two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left. Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”

Again, the context for this passage is that Jesus is telling his disciples what it will be like when He returns at His Second Coming. Those who are “left” are those who will not be going with Jesus to Heaven. But at this point, when Jesus returns, it's all over. It is the final judgement.

The idea of a “Rapture” where Jesus comes and takes only believers but leaves others to wait until a “third coming,” which will then be the final judgement, is simply not found in the Bible. Nor did any Christian (Protestant or Catholic) even consider this possibility prior to John Darby inventing it in the 1830s.

John Nelson Darby was an English Protestant minister who developed this novel “rapture theology,” which has become so popular today in Protestant circles and is the topic of many books and films, such as the “Left Behind” series.

While it may make for an exciting and even inspiring movie or TV series, there is simply no scriptural basis for Darby's “Rapture” Theology. Rather it requires a distortion and pulling out of context of several key passages, while ignoring the rest of the Scriptures and what Christians have always believed for 2,000 years about the Second Coming of Christ.

It is an article of faith, found in our creed, that we believe in only 2 comings of Jesus: at his birth and at the final judgement. His second coming will be at the end of the world. In short, this popularized idea of a rapture that occurs separately from the Second Coming of Christ at the end of the world, is a false interpretation of Scripture that is not accepted by the Catholic Faith.

Thinking about the Second Coming of Jesus however, should motivate us to always remain vigilant and to be ready for the Master's return, for none of us know the day or the hour.